

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Arkansas native gets interim job (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

E.C. Walker, an Arkansas native who most recently headed operations for the Texas State Teachers Association for more than 10 years, will serve as interim executive director of the Arkansas Education Association, effective Monday.

Walker will fill the vacancy created by Rich Nagel's retirement earlier this month until a permanent appointment to the executive director's post can be made, said Donna Morey, president of the Arkansas Education Association, which is the state's largest teacher organization.

That search for the executive director is ongoing, Morey said, and she anticipates that Walker, who retired in 2011 to Jefferson City, Mo., will serve the Arkansas organization for a relatively short period.

"He has lots of experience in education and education policy," Morey said of Walker, who has worked in the education field for 30 years in Indiana, Missouri and Texas. "He is highly respected among all the National Education Association state directors. We appreciate him being willing to step in."

Walker was born in Mulberry to parents who were both teachers in Arkansas public schools. His wife of 47 years, Ann Core Walker, also is an Arkansas native and was born in Little Rock.

Morey said she has known Walker for about eight years, largely through their mutual involvement with the National Council of State Education Associations. He was president of that association last year, said Morey, who served on that organization's board of directors for two years.

Prior to his role as executive director for the Texas State Teachers Association, Walker worked for 16 years for the Missouri National Education Association in numerous roles leading up to and including assistant executive director.

He also worked for the Missouri and the Indiana legislatures. In Missouri, he was assigned to the Senate Education and Banking Committee. In Indiana, through Indiana University, he worked for the Indiana Oral History Project.

Walker is a former teacher who worked for two years in the New Franklin, Mo., schools and one year at North Dakota State University.

He has a bachelor's degree in history with a minor in education from what is now Central Methodist University in Fayette, Mo. His master's degree, also in history, is from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. He did post-graduate work at Indiana University at Bloomington.

Education department names new chief of staff (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Deborah Coffman, director of professional development in the Arkansas Department of Education, on Monday became the agency's new chief of staff.

Coffman replaces Phyllis Stewart, who is moving to a chief of staff/communications position at the Arkansas School Boards Association.

Coffman, who will earn an annual salary of \$86,844, previously worked as a literacy coach and specialist in the Pocahontas School District and for the Northeast Arkansas Education Cooperative in Walnut Ridge. She is a former elementary school teacher in the Hoxie School District.

She earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education in 1982 and a master's degree in the same field in 1992, both from Arkansas State University.

Judge sets hearing date in school-choice lawsuit (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

A federal judge set a hearing for Monday to consider requests for a preliminary injunction or a dismissal of a lawsuit that claims the Blytheville School District cannot exempt itself from the Arkansas Public School Choice Act of 2013 for the 2013-14 school year.

A group of parents and grandparents sued the district over the law May 20 after they determined that the district's resolution to opt out of allowing its students to transfer to other districts under the new law was based on irrelevant and outdated court precedents and that it was filed after the April 1 deadline set out in the statute.

Attorneys for those parents have asked for a preliminary injunction, which would halt the application of that exemption while U.S. District Judge Kristine Baker considers the case.

Attorneys for the district have asked Baker to dismiss the plaintiffs' suit.

The plaintiffs have not exhausted the remedies outlined in the law, defense attorneys have said.

The plaintiffs' applications to transfer their students have not yet been denied, and they have not appealed those decisions to the state Board of Education, as the law allows, the attorneys wrote in their motion to dismiss.

And the case should be heard in state courts because it's a matter of interpretation of state law, not a federal civil-rights issue as plaintiffs allege, the school district's attorneys wrote.

Baker set the hearing date in a Monday order in which she also asked attorneys on all sides to file briefs responding to several questions.

The state's school-choice law has been the broadest and most commonly used method for students to transfer out of their residential school districts.

Lawmakers created the Arkansas Public School Choice Act of 2013 in response to a judge's decision to strike down its 1989 predecessor as unconstitutional.

The 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis has not yet ruled on appeals of that decision, in which a federal judge tossed the entire 1989 law after finding a restriction on some transfers relied too heavily on race.

Under the 2013 law, students can transfer out of their residential districts with few limitations.

Those limitations include a provision that exempts districts from allowing the transfers if they are "subject to the desegregation order or mandate of a federal court or agency remedying the effects of past racial segregation."

The law requires districts to notify the Arkansas Department of Education by April 1 if they plan to claim an exemption from the law for the proceeding school year.

But that deadline had already passed by the time the legislature passed the final version of the bill and before Gov. Mike Beebe signed it into law April 16.

In a memo, the state agency told districts to instead notify it of exemptions by May 17.

The 2,500-student Blytheville district and 22 others filed exemptions by that deadline.

Baker on Monday requested briefs from attorneys about how the state Education Department memo factors into arguments, whether the issue should be directed to the Arkansas Supreme Court for review and what effect Blytheville's exemption will have on students who wish to transfer to other districts.

Education Department data show that 12,691 of the state's 471,867 students have transferred out of their resident school districts in the 2012-13 school year.

While it is not possible to determine how many of those students used the 1989 School Choice Act, the department has said the policy is the most popular method of transfer.

Attorneys for the plaintiffs and for several educational policy groups have said the Blytheville case may open the door to additional challenges of the 2013 transfer law.

No district can claim a valid exemption from the law this year because they all missed its April 1 deadline, they've said.

One attorney representing plaintiffs is Alec Gaines, the husband of Arkansas Democrat-Gazette Assistant Publisher Eliza Gaines.

Bentonville Approves \$74M For High School; 4 Schools Placed On Probation (KFSM/KXNW)

Video available at <http://5newsonline.com/2013/06/17/bentonville-mulls-74m-bond-for-new-high-school-4-schools-placed-on-probation/>

The Bentonville School Board gave the school district approval to seek \$74 million in bond money to pay for a second high school Monday night (June 17), while administrators explained why four Bentonville schools are now on probation.

The School Board unanimously approved applying for \$74.7 million in bond money through the Arkansas Department of Education to construct a second high school. The application is expected to be reviewed in July.

"The state gives authority for us to sell the bonds, bond holders then purchase those bonds and we repay them from the seeking fund or the millage that we collect from the voters," said Sterling Ming, executive director of finance for the school district.

Voters will decide in the September ballot if to approve the bonds and the 2.9 millage increase to fund the second high school. The millage would pay for the bonds.

"Once the state board approves it and the voters approve it in September, it's usually about a four to six week turn around that you can sell the bonds," Ming said.

Also on Monday, administrators acknowledged four district schools being placed on probation by the Arkansas Department of Education for enrolling too many children in some of the classrooms, Ley said.

Superintendent Michael Poore said, "That's our mistake and now we have to take corrective action and we have to inform our public that we made this mistake."

State education codes require secondary-level schools to have no more than 28 students in each classroom. Bentonville High School, Old High Middle School, Ruth Hale Barker Middle School and Bright Field Middle School each had more than 28 students in some of their music and arts class, catching the attention of state education officials, Ley said.

"Our principals definitely know that this is the number that they need to be at, the second thing is we've change it so that even in our own system now that number would be called out," Poore said.

Ley said the school district has not changed the number of students allowed into those classes in the last four or five years, and administrators mistakenly thought they were allowed to put extra students in those classes. Ley calls the situation a misunderstanding and said administrators are fixing the problem.

The schools were placed on probation, which acts as a warning. If the class sizes do not shrink in the coming years, the schools could face forced changes in curriculum and administration leadership.

The Bentonville School District could get up to \$15.4 million dollars to build a second high school, that's if voters in the district approve a millage increase on the September ballot.

The state money will come through the Arkansas Department of Education's Academic Facilities Partnership Program.

Superintendent Michael Poore said a new school is needed because of overcrowding at Bentonville High School.

"That money will actually be scaled back just a little bit because the size of our project is going to be scaled back. Initially we submitted 2,500 students now we are going to submit 2,250 but the money is there that's the best part," said Poore.

The school board had to make cuts to lower the cost of the school.

"We cut out all the other fluff that was in it. We took out HVAC improvements, we took out the technology improvements, and we took out the huge athletic facilities. We took a lot of things out to get this more palatable for the community to say 'that's a number that I can afford to support,'" said School Board President, Travis Riggs. "When you throw in top all of those cuts an extra \$15 million you're getting from the state it just compounds the effect and we're able to bring it in at a much lower cost and like I said we are hearing potentially we might get this below 2.9 mills."

The school district could receive a refund from the state on the construction for about \$12 million, said Mary Ley, communication director for Bentonville Public Schools.

The school district must break ground on a second high school by October 2014.

Jurors Hear Testimony In Sex Trial Of Former Lavaca Teacher (Southwest Times Record)

GREENWOOD — Jurors in Greenwood heard testimony from nine witnesses Monday, including two alleged victims in the sexual indecency trial of a Lavaca alderman and former teacher.

Jack Woodrow James, 52, faces three counts of sexual indecency with a child, three counts of attempted sexual indecency with a child, second-degree sexual assault and harassment.

Opening arguments and testimony began Monday afternoon after a jury of six men and six women was seated.

Deputy prosecutor Alison Houston outlined the likely testimonies the jury would hear. Greenwood defense attorney Michael Harry described James as a devoted father, teacher, mentor and community leader and told the jury he intended to present reasonable doubt regarding the allegations.

Two of the alleged victims, who were in middle school at the time of the alleged incidents, testified, along with two mothers of alleged victims, about explicit comments the boys said James made. Houston also introduced into evidence a transcript of texts between the boys and one of the mothers.

Four Lavaca school officials also testified.

The boys accused James of making inappropriate remarks to them and other boys throughout the 2011-12 school year about their sexual habits. One of the boys said James made explicit sexual comments to him, and that James allegedly showed a picture of his privates on a cellphone to him and another boy.

The boy said he confronted James about the remarks at the end of the school year, and that James told him he would stop.

When Harry asked the boys why they had waited several months before they told anyone in May 2012 about the alleged remarks, they both said it was because they felt embarrassed about the incidents.

Another boy who said he overheard James making explicit remarks to two boys also testified.

On Nov. 21, James pleaded not guilty to the felony charges. On Nov. 7, he was convicted of misdemeanor harassment and three counts of attempted sexual indecency with a child, but appealed the charges from District Court to Circuit Court.

The sexual-assault charge involved an allegation that in 2006, James touched the genitals of a minor male in a van outside James' home where the boy was visiting James' sons, according to an Arkansas State Police report.

James was a social studies and history teacher at Lavaca Middle School and retired in May after the complaints were turned over to local law enforcement. He was elected in 2010 as Lavaca city alderman for Ward 1 and was unopposed in the Nov. 6 general election.

Testimony will resume in front of Judge Stephen Tabor at 9 a.m. today.

Teacher pension election is upheld (nwaonline.com)

The Arkansas Teacher Retirement System's trustees have dismissed trustee Janelle Riddle's challenge of an election in which she lost to fellow trustee Kathy Clayton.

Then, in last Thursday's meeting, the trustees certified that Clayton, a teacher at Malvern High School, defeated trustee Riddle, a teacher at the St. Paul School in the Huntsville School District, by a vote of 385 to 275 among system members in the 4th Congressional District in a runoff election. There were 10,158 teachers eligible to vote in the race, according to system records.

Riddle, a trustee since July 2007, and Clayton, a trustee since August, qualified for the runoff by garnering 351 and 318 votes respectively. Clarksville teacher Kathy Howell finished third with 166 votes.

Riddle had questioned the integrity of the voting process, saying a fellow trustee had told her May 28 that she'd lost her race - several days before the voting period had ended and roughly a week before the ballots were supposed to be counted and certified.

After Thursday's retirement system meeting, Riddle said she is considering challenging the runoff election results in court. Clayton declined to comment.

Riddle was one of two trustees to vote in December 2008 against hiring former state Sen. George Hopkins, D-Malvern, as the system's executive director. She was the only trustee to vote in February against authorizing a \$60 million system investment in the proposed \$1.1 billion Big River Steel project near Osceola.

The 15-member board of trustees governs state government's largest retirement system with investments totaling about \$13 billion. It serves more than 70,000 working members and more than 30,000 retired members.

Riddle challenged VR Election Services' certified election results after she said trustee Lloyd Black of Little Rock told her in a May 28 e-mail that "The election result was not what we wanted, but you should not let it get you down."

Black is a retired principal at Wakefield Elementary School in the Little Rock School District. He has served on the board since July 2010.

In an e-mail dated May 29 to Hopkins, Riddle said that this "early 'announcement'" of the election results "certainly seems to indicate that ethics violations may have occurred," which could compromise "the integrity and validity of this entire run-off election process."

Riddle's suggestion of possible ethics violations led Hopkins to ask the Legislative Audit Division to investigate the matter.

Deputy Legislative Auditor Kim Williams said the audit division subsequently learned that Black "had mistakenly assumed that the election results were final and that [Riddle] had not won ... her respective race."

Division employees "could not confirm that any ethics violations took place regarding the board elections," according to Williams.

Black said in an affidavit dated Tuesday that no person either directly or indirectly gave him election results on or before May 28, the date of his e-mail to Riddle.

“I had assumed that Ms. Riddle’s geographic location in the far northwestern part of the 4th congressional district versus Kathy Clayton’s position in the more central part of the district would provide Kathy Clayton with enough votes to win the election,” Black said in his affidavit.

“I sent the email because Janelle Riddle is a friend of mine [and] I had been out of town a few days at the end of May, and upon returning to town, I just assumed that the election was over and that Ms. Riddle had lost,” Black said.

Karl Koelker, election director of Dallas-based VR Election Services, said in an affidavit dated Monday that all the ballots received through June 3 for the 4th Congressional District post on the board were counted and tallied on June 4.

He said he “did not communicate with or provide any information, details, status, projection or opinion concerning the votes of the ongoing run-off election to any ATRS staff or any person.”